

Storm Spotters

Technology plays a critical role in severe weather, but another important element in the warning system is the storm spotter. Storm spotters come from all walks of life, joined by their interest in weather and serving their community. Spotters are associated with SKYWARN, a volunteer program developed many years ago by the National Weather Service (NWS) to train and organize spotters in every community. Spotters are organized around local emergency management agencies, amateur radio clubs, and public service personnel from fire departments, rescue squads, and law enforcement agencies.

The Alabama SKYWARN Foundation, Inc., is a non-profit organization established to promote severe weather safety in Alabama. Each year, Alabamians are faced with a variety of severe weather threats ranging from winter storms to tornadoes. One key to keeping the toll in deaths and injuries to a minimum is education. By understanding the dangers and knowing the proper safety precautions ahead of time, Alabamians can respond quickly and appropriately when those dangers threaten.

The Alabama SKYWARN Foundation relies on donations to defray the costs in these efforts. These donations are tax deductible. The Foundation is especially pleased to recognize the support of Mercedes-Benz International, the American Red Cross Birmingham Chapter, and Russell Corporation for their direct support in making this annual publication possible.

The Foundation has hopes as added resources become available to help in other ways to improve severe weather safety and awareness in Alabama. NOAA Weather Radio receivers can be purchased for distribution to people who are unable to afford them, especially in rural areas where outdoor sirens are less practical. Storm spotters provide valuable reports during warning situations, and many of these efforts need support since they are primarily voluntary.

More information about the Alabama SKYWARN Foundation can be found at www.alabamaskywarn.org.



Warning Coordination Meteorologist Jason B. Wright presenting a Storm Spotters Class

Spotters are critical because they provide timely information on the actual weather that is occurring at the ground, known as ground truth. Satellite imagery and Doppler radar provide NWS meteorologists with large amounts of information about the storm and its structure, but does not provide the specifics about the weather actually occurring at the ground. This is where spotters become the eyes and ears for the community.

Storm spotters go through training provided by the NWS to gain an understanding of storm structure, especially the most severe thunderstorms climatology of Alabama tornadoes, exposure to visual clues, and information on tornado safety and reporting procedures.

Amateur radio operators compose one of the largest groups of spotters in Alabama because of their ability and willingness to communicate using their radios even when power and conventional communication methods are knocked out. NWS offices have established working relationships with the amateur radio community by including radio equipment in the offices to communicate with spotters in the field.

Additional information on storm spotter activities can be found on the Internet at the NWS web sites (see page 17) and at www.alert-alabama.org.